

FEATURE

THE “ONE CHINA” POLICY: TERMS OF ART

PLAYING WITH WORDS HAS BEEN AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN MAINTAINING THE UNEASY PEACE BETWEEN BEIJING AND TAIPEI

BY Stanton Jue

In dealing with China, New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman offers three important lessons that Washington should heed:

- *Carry a big stick and a big dictionary.*
- *China-Taiwan relations are inherently unstable.*
- *Get used to it — it’s going to be this way for a long time.*

Friedman’s three rules are indeed astute and deserve our attention. As he suggests, the three parties to the PRC-Taiwan dispute are all deeply intertwined, so playing with words has been an essential element in maintaining the uneasy peace of the past 33 years.

Take the “one China” principle, a core issue common to numerous documents and statements issued by the United States, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) both before and after the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act codified the current diplomatic arrangements between the U.S. and the ROC. With few exceptions, political leaders in all three capitals have been careful not to define the term precisely or to directly challenge their counterparts’ interpretations of the concept.

Although the origin of the idea of “one China” can be traced as far back as the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the first modern use of the term occurs in the Cairo Declaration of 1943, followed by the Potsdam Declaration of 1945. Both documents state that all Chinese territories then occupied by Japan, such as Taiwan and the nearby Pescadore Islands, were to be restored to

the Republic of China at the war’s end. In Beijing’s view, of course, the ROC ceased to exist in 1949 when communist forces drove Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists off the mainland into exile on Taiwan, leaving the People’s Republic of China as the sole legitimate government of China.

The PRC’s subsequent entry into the Korean War on the side of North Korea, and the deepening of the Cold War, pushed Washington and Taipei even closer together; General Douglas MacArthur memorably described Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier.” As political leaders in Washington also grew increasingly wary of China’s future intentions, it became a major target of the U.S. containment strategy in the western Pacific during the 1950s.

In July 1971, when Kissinger told Premier Zhou Enlai that the United States did not seek “a two-Chinas” or “one-China, one-Taiwan” solution, nor an independent Taiwan.” At that time, Zhou already showed a concern for China’s sovereignty over Taiwan as well as a future Japanese role in the region.

To understand how the “one China” principle is intertwined with the vital interests of the U.S., one needs to look back to Henry Kissinger’s secret mission to Beijing in July 1971, when Kissinger told Premier Zhou Enlai that the United States did not seek “a two Chinas” or “one-China, one-Taiwan” solution, nor an independent Taiwan.” At that time, Zhou already showed a concern for China’s sovereignty over Taiwan as well as a future Japanese role in the region. He wanted assurances that China’s claim of territorial integrity,

including Taiwan, was respected and that Washington would not support any movement that was inconsistent with the concept of one China, even though the nascent independence movement on the island was relatively small and insignificant. According to a National Security Archive report issued on Dec. 11, 2003, we now know that President Richard Nixon assured Chinese leaders in February 1972 that he would indeed work against such an outcome. (These statements were closely held until a mandatory declassification review was completed by the Nixon presidential materials staff in 2003.)

Following President Nixon's historic visit to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué on Feb. 28, 1972, Sino-American relations warmed steadily. This eventually led to the signing of a joint communiqué establishing diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States on Jan. 1, 1979. Under this agreement, the United States recognizes the PRC as the sole legal government of China, though it maintains cultural, commercial and other unofficial relations between the people of Taiwan and the United States.

To codify those ties, congressional supporters of the ROC enacted the Taiwan Relations Act on April 10, 1979. Under the TRA, the American Institute in Taiwan, a nongovernmental entity, was created to maintain unofficial bilateral ties. Thus, the AIT's headquarters is located in Rosslyn, Va., not within the Department of State; and to maintain the concept of unofficiality, personnel assigned to the AIT are on loan from the U.S. government for the duration of their assignments (per Section 11 of the TRA). Taiwan also maintains a similar office in the United States, the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office (originally known as the Coordination Council for North American Affairs), with its head office located in Washington, D.C. Otherwise, however, with a few exceptions, the AIT field office in Taipei functions as a regular U.S. embassy.

The TRA also specifies that "The United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." The PRC government has consistently objected to this provision, which it considers to be interference in its internal affairs and inconsistent with the one China principle. However, it seems to have been mollified by repeated American assurances, such as the testimony of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 25, 1999, that "the U.S. has not and will not support any Taiwan independence movement."

On July 9, 1999, in an interview with the Voice of Germany in Taipei, former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui described Taiwan's relations with China as "special state to state." Beijing immediately demanded that Lee cease deviating from the "one China" principle, and threatened to use force if necessary to prevent Taiwan from formally separating from China. But however unpopular Lee's view was on the mainland, it did not lack supporters back in the U.S. Conservative members of Congress lined up to denounce the PRC's position. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms, R-N.C., said that "Lee's statement has presented an opportunity to break free from the anachronistic, Beijing-inspired, one-China policy which has imprisoned U.S. policy for years." Rep. Benjamin Gilman, R-N.Y., Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, warned that unless it protested the PRC's stance, the U.S. would be conceding that "Beijing is the capital of one China, including Taiwan."

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, created by Congress to monitor China/Taiwan/U.S. relations, issued a report last June calling for a reassessment of the "one China" policy, either to abrogate it altogether or refine it to exclude

Taiwan from China because it does not take into account the new realities in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, the “one China” policy is very much alive. President George W. Bush telephoned Chinese President Hu Jintao from Air Force One last July 31 to repeat “U.S. commitment to a one-China policy and nonsupport for Taiwan’s independence.” During his October 2004 trip to China, Secretary of State Colin Powell told the press in Beijing that “Taiwan does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation.” He told Hong Kong’s Phoenix TV: “There is only one China. Taiwan is not independent. It does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation, and that remains our policy, our firm policy.” This longstanding if quietly held U.S. view, not much different from what Kissinger told Zhou in 1971 or what Clinton said about the “three noes” in 1998, caused an uproar in Taipei. State Department officials later clarified Powell’s comments as not being a signal of any change in U.S. policy, which is to encourage both sides to resolve their differences peacefully via dialogue.

The Three Pillars

In Beijing’s view, the Shanghai Communiqué of Feb. 28, 1972, the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the U.S. and the PRC of Jan. 1, 1979, and the U.S.-China Communiqué on Arms Sales of Aug. 17, 1982, form the three pillars underlying the complex political and security interplay among China, Taiwan and the United States. (Supporters of the ROC’s claims would argue that the Taiwan Relations Act deserves to be added to that foundation.)

It is worth noting that in none of the communiqués does the U.S. ever explicitly state its own position on the future of Taiwan. In the Shanghai Communiqué, the U.S. *acknowledges* that “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait claim that there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China ... and the U.S. does not challenge that position” (*italics added*). In the opinion of some commentators, that acknowledgement did not mean the U.S. agreed,

however; nor did it mean that the U.S. expressed its own position.

In the 1979 Joint Communiqué, the Chinese text changed “ren shi” (acknowledge) to “cheng ren” (recognize). During the debate on the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, Sen. Jacob Javits, R-N.Y., noted the difference, and urged that “we not subscribe to the Chinese position on one China either way.” Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher assured the senators that “we regard the English text as being the binding text.” Three years later, the Communiqué on Arms Sales repeated that the U.S. has no intention of pursuing a policy of “two Chinas or one China, one Taiwan,” reconfirming earlier promises of the support of a one China policy.

Testifying before the House International Relations Committee on April 21, 2004, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly delivered a comprehensive explanation of U.S. policy toward Taiwan and China. He emphasized that the U.S. “remains committed to the one-China policy based on the three Joint Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act. The U.S. does not support independence for Taiwan or unilateral moves that would change the status quo as we define it.

For Beijing, this means no use of force or threat to use force against Taiwan. For Taipei, it means exercising prudence in managing all aspects of cross-strait relations. For both sides, it means no statements or actions that would unilaterally alter Taiwan’s status.” During the Q&A period afterward, Kelly was asked to define further the “one China” policy. He admitted, “I cannot very easily define it. I can tell you what it is not. It is not the one-China policy or the one-China principle that Beijing suggests, and it may not be the definition that some would have in Taiwan.”

With the passage of time, the concept of “one China” became increasingly scrutinized by scholars in the West, especially since Taiwan has undergone profound transformation from

authoritarianism to democracy. Some have openly questioned the application of the one-China concept to Taiwan and even suggested a new framework to redefine the relationship in order to reduce misunderstanding. However, neither the PRC nor the ROC has ever retreated from the notion that Taiwan is part of China, and its claim of sovereignty over the island is not in dispute. As recently as January 2005, Beijing pulled out Jiang Zemin's "Eight Points Speech," delivered in 1995, to underscore the Chinese position on Taiwan. Key points include: "Adherence to the principle of one China is the basis and premise for peaceful reunification. China's sovereignty and territory must never be allowed to suffer [a] split. We must firmly oppose any words or actions aimed at creating an independent Taiwan and the propositions which are in contravention of the principle of one China."

On March 14, 2005, China's National People's Congress went further, enacting an anti-secession law by a vote of 2,896 to zero. The measure enshrines in law the PRC's determination to prevent "independence forces" from separating Taiwan from China, warning that should peaceful means prove futile in reunification efforts, the government in Beijing "shall employ non-peaceful means and other measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity ..." (Article 8).

The Bush administration reportedly counseled Beijing not to undertake such a unilateral measure to poison the atmosphere at a time when cross-strait relations seemed to be improving. Speaking at Sophia University in Tokyo on March 19, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in response: "Our one-China policy is clear and unchanged. We oppose unilateral changes in the status quo, whether by word or deed by either party. Both sides must recognize that neither can solve the problem alone. We urge both sides to continue to expand recent steps toward a more productive relationship. And in the interests of peace and stability we stand by our obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act" And during a brief

stopover in Beijing on March 21, Rice told Chinese leaders that the anti-secession law is "not helpful" in reducing cross-strait tensions. She further reiterated the U.S. commitment to the "one China" principle as enunciated in the three joint communiqués, but added that America will also stand by its obligations to Taiwan under the TRA.

For its part, as expected, Taiwan condemned the law as a unilateral provocative act that will further alienate Taiwan from wanting to be united with the mainland. Massive protest demonstrations were staged on the island on March 26.

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Six Assurances

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Ever since the law's passage, Beijing has exerted constant pressure on Washington to repeal it as incompatible with the "one China" concept set forth in the previous two joint communiqués. In particular, the PRC vigorously demanded a fixed date for the cessation of American arms sales to Taiwan. According to John Holdridge's book *Cross the Divide* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), the Chinese foreign minister explicitly threatened that if the U.S. did not respond with a "date certain," China would downgrade diplomatic relations with the U.S. (as it had already down-graded relations

with the Netherlands over the sale of two submarines to Taiwan). However, U.S. negotiators held firm and rejected the Chinese ultimatum. These discussions ultimately led to the open-ended formulation used in the 1982 Communiqué on Arms Sales.

Not surprisingly, the Taiwanese press directed a heavy stream of editorial invective against the U.S. decision to stop short of explicit guarantees on arms sales to the ROC. In response, Washington eased Taiwan's anxiety somewhat by informally offering the so-called "Six Assurances" in July 1982. The text of these assurances has long been well known, but has never been publicly delineated in U.S. documents. James Lilley, who was the U.S. chief representative in Taipei at the time, comments in his book *China Hands* (Public Affairs, 2004) that the Six Assurances cushioned the anxiety and uneasiness of the Taiwan leadership over the Arms Sales Communiqué. He describes the document as "a personal letter from President Reagan to President Chiang Ching-kuo, in keeping with his warm sentiments for Taiwan." Testifying before the House International Relations Committee on March 20, 1998, Nat Bellocchi, a former chairman of the American Institute of Taiwan, described the six assurances:

- The U.S. does not agree to set a date certain for ending arms sales to Taiwan;
- It does not agree to engage in prior consultations with Beijing on arms sales to Taiwan;
- The U.S. sees no mediation role for itself in the PRC-ROC dispute;
- It has no plans to seek revision of the Taiwan Relations Act;
- There has been no change in our longstanding position on the issue of sovereignty over Taiwan,
- The U.S. will not attempt to exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.

In addition, with regard to Taiwan's future status, the U.S. government has repeatedly and publicly stated that it is a matter for both sides to decide, with our only

stipulation being that the resolution must come about through peaceful means.

Given the changes of the past 23 years, some may question whether the assurances are still valid and binding. Secretary of State Colin Powell, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 8, 2001, said all Six Assurances, including the future status of Taiwan, remain at the heart of U.S. policy toward the Republic of China.

The Three Noes

During his June 1998 summit with President Jiang Zemin in Beijing, President Bill Clinton told the press: "I had a chance to reiterate our Taiwan policy, which is that we don't support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan—one China. And we don't believe that Taiwan should be a member of any organization for which statehood is a requirement. So, I think we have a consistent policy. Our only policy has been that we think it has to be done peacefully..."

Journalist James Mann, in his book *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), says that the formulation of the "three noes" can be traced to the promises made by Bill Clinton to Jiang in a personal letter delivered by Secretary of State Warren Christopher at a Brunei meeting in August 1995. This letter, which has never been made public, was intended to assure the Chinese president that the U.S. would oppose Taiwan independence, would not support two Chinas or a one China—one Taiwan formula, and would not support Taiwan's admission to the United Nations.

In many respects, the "three noes" statement is similar to earlier U.S. promises made to China's leaders. But Clinton's formulation made clearer the status of Taiwan and what the U.S. would and would not support, by publicly ruling out any outcome that involved independence for the ROC and membership in any organization for which statehood is required. Accordingly, some in Congress criticized it for

supporting Beijing's assertion of sovereignty over Taiwan and heightening the island's anxiety over its future.

Proceed with Caution

The Taiwan Strait remains one of the most likely flash points anywhere in the world today. Fortunately, there have been signs of a deepening understanding by all three parties of the risks conflict would pose, and the need to take even small steps away from the brink. These include the establishment of direct charter flights between China and Taiwan during the recent lunar new year celebration; the cancellation of a military exercise along the Taiwan coast; some progress in the "three links" of direct transportation, communications and trade; ROC President Chen Shui-bian's recent promises not to initiate constitutional reforms touching on politically sensitive issues such as Taiwan's sovereignty and a name change for the country; and more unequivocal U.S. statements opposing unilateral alteration of the status quo in the area. Despite Beijing's passage of the anti-secession act and other posturings and provocations by both sides, the basic process of reconciliation remains intact.

Yet despite the promise of these tentative steps, it is important to bear in mind that the interests of all three governments remain fundamentally different. Two of them are prosperous democracies, while a different two are nuclear states with global interests. Thus, even when all three countries' policies converge in certain situations, and on specific issues, they don't do so completely or for long.

These competing interests have important implications for U.S. policy, particularly as China departs from the current strategy of domestic development to pursue a proactive, more assertive foreign policy dubbed "peaceful rise." This policy alarms Beijing's neighbors, who fear that its rise may not, in fact, be so peaceful, given the PRC's gigantic economic clout, nuclear status and one-party political system.

Over the long term, it is prudent for Washington to avoid the temptation of getting directly involved in mediation or negotiation between Taipei and Beijing. The oft-repeated U.S. position that "a peaceful resolution of the cross-strait issue is a matter for both sides to decide so long as it is made without coercion" remains valid.

President Bush recently told a questioner: "I am convinced the cross-strait issue can be solved peacefully. It is just going to take some time to do. And we will continue to work to see to it that it [is resolved]." Toward that end, there should not be any illusions or false expectations on our part. Over the next five years, the U.S. must remain vigilant while encouraging the two rivals to build trust. Although there is growing pressure within some circles for a higher level of U.S. engagement in cross-strait relations, there is no urgent need to do so or to micromanage the relationship. Our longstanding policy, based on caution, firmness and balance, as articulated and endorsed by seven administrations, is working, albeit not perfectly. The longer all three governments avoid taking precipitous action that could disrupt the status quo, the brighter the prospects of long-term peace and stability throughout the region.

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